

What is Hellenistic culture and how did it spread among regions in Afroeurasia?

Topic: Ancient World, Ancient Greece, Hellenism, Egypt, South Asia, Arab World, primary source set

By: Anya Free, CHSSP, UC Irvine History Project. Updated in 2023.

Guiding Question: What is Hellenistic culture and how did it spread among regions in Afroeurasia?

History Standards and Framework Excerpt:

6.4 Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of Ancient Greece.

6.4.7 Trace the rise of Alexander the Great and the spread of Greek culture eastward and into Egypt.

Framework Excerpt:

Students investigate how Greek culture spread in the Hellenistic era, with the following question: **How did Greek trade, travel, and colonies, followed by the conquests of Alexander the Great and the spread of Hellenistic culture, affect increasing connections among regions in Afroeurasia?** Philip II's son, Alexander of Macedonia (ruled 336–323), led a military campaign of unprecedented scope, conquering the Persian Empire, Egypt, Central Asia, and even to the Indus River valley. Following his death, his generals and their sons carved his short-lived empire into separate states. The following two centuries are known as the Hellenistic period. Hellenistic refers to the influence of Greek cultural forms in regions far beyond the Aegean though, in fact, a lively interchange of products and ideas took place in the broad region from the Mediterranean to the Indian subcontinent. Athenian democracy did not survive, but Greek ideas, such as language, sculpture, and city planning, mingled creatively with the cultural styles of Egypt, Persia, and India. For example, the Egyptian goddess Isis took on a Greek-like identity and came to be venerated widely in the Hellenistic lands. The era also brought innovations in science and mathematics. For example, the principles of geometry came from Euclid, who lived in the Hellenistic Egyptian city of Alexandria. During the Hellenistic period, exchanges of products, ideas, and technologies across Afroeurasia increased greatly and penetrated into many more regions, culminating with connections to China via the Silk Road. Cosmopolitan Hellenistic cities became sites of encounter for people of different cultures, religions, and regions. Eventually, the Hellenistic kingdoms west of Persia succumbed to the greater military power of Rome, which in turn absorbed many aspects of Greek culture.

Common Core State Standards/ Literacy Skill Addressed:

Reading, grade 6-8:

1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of of primary and secondary sources.
2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

Please note that some of the content and source materials we will cover uses violent and sexist language, and includes outdated and offensive terms and images not in use today. We welcome all discussions about what is, is not, or could be appropriate for classroom instruction. Images are high resolution and may be resized for classroom use.

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Additional Resources:

[Hellenistic Culture, CHSSP inquiry set](#)

[Religious Influences on the Roman Empire, CHSSP inquiry set](#)

[The Gandhara Scroll, a Rare 2,000-Year-Old Text of Early Buddhism](#)

[Kingdoms of the successors of Alexander: after the Battle of Ipsus, B.C. 301. Map](#)

[Rome Reborn: The Vatican Library & Renaissance Culture](#)

[Story of Hanukkah](#)

[Geometric diagrams in margins of text of first printed edition of Euclid's "Elements"](#)

[Palmyra](#)

[Petra, Jordan | Civilisations - BBC Two, Video](#)

Introduction:

This image-based source set that includes a student handout (pages 11-18) is designed to demonstrate how the conquests of Alexander the Great and the subsequent spread of Hellenistic culture affected increasing connections among regions in Afroeurasia in different aspects, including religion, art, and science. The word Hellenism comes from the Greek word “Hellēnikós,” which means “pertaining to Greece or Greeks.” Hellēn means “a Greek.” Teachers may point out the cross-cultural connections in the students' own lives and in American modern society in general.

Different degrees of adoption, adaptation and interpretation of various Greek cultural forms are evident in many regions around Ancient Afroeurasia. One of the most visual ways to trace this influence is through arts and architecture. Sources 3 and 4 demonstrate how classical Greek architecture dominated throughout the Hellenistic world, sometimes incorporating local traditions. The fusion of artistic motifs and styles, including Greek and Parthian, is also a notable feature in the art of the Buddhist kingdom Gandhara (source 2). The teacher may point out to the students that classical architectural forms found their way to modern times via the neoclassical architectural style (also called Classicism). For example, the [U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.](#) features Corinthian columns, statues in Greco-Roman style, and other classical elements.

Hellenistic culture connected people, traditions, and ideas of west and east. The Diadochi (successors) tore apart Alexander’s empire into several kingdoms but continued his Hellenization policies in their lands and active colonization that included building new cities in the East. While Alexander built his new Egyptian capital Alexandria, which became a major cultural center of Egypt (source 4) with its famous library, his successors and their dynasties founded many other Hellenistic cities in the Middle East, bringing Greek immigrants and their cultural influence to many remote areas of the region. One example of such a colony that became a site of encounter is the Seleucid town Dura-Europos (source 5), that, while gradually reducing its “Greekness,” adopted many other cultural forms due to its geographical position between the Roman and Parthian Empires and the region’s diverse population.

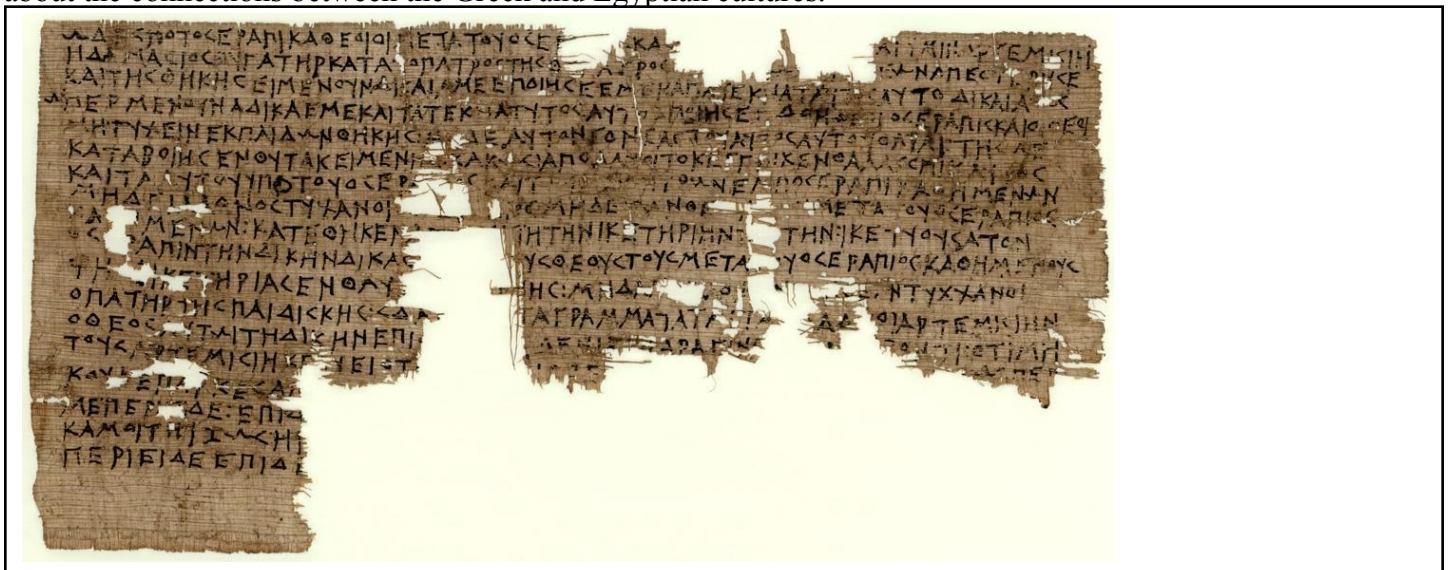
One of the most prominent aspects of Hellenistic culture is religious tolerance and syncretism. Alexander, who considered Greek civilization to be superior, also respected local customs and deities of the conquered people. When ancient Greeks learned about foreign gods they often times identified them with their own equivalents. For example, the Greeks identified Egyptian chief god Amon Ra with Zeus, which is why when Alexander was crowned as pharaoh in conquered Memphis and received a title “son of Ra,” he was considered to be a son of Zeus. Oftentimes in the Ancient world, the gods and their attributes were mingled together to create new deities, such as Serapis (source 1). Religious polytheistic syncretism continued flourishing in the region under the rule of the Roman Empire until the triumph of Christianity (source 4).

Alexander the Great died at 33 years old after uniting Greeks to destroy the enormous Persian state and building a huge empire that stretched from the Adriatic Sea to the Indus River, from the Central Asian deserts to the Indian Ocean, fully transforming Afroeurasia. This transformation allowed for the unprecedented international exchange of ideas, technology, goods, and religious practices. While the Hellenistic era in a political sense ended with the consolidation of Roman power, its cultural, scientific, and philosophical legacy continued to influence the world for many centuries to come (source 6).

Source 1. [The Curse of Artemisia](#)

Translation: Jane Rowlandson, [Women and society in Greek and Roman Egypt: a sourcebook](#). (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 63.

About: This source is one of the earliest surviving Greek papyri. It came from the community of Ionian Greeks in Memphis (near modern Cairo, Egypt) and was created in the late 4th century BCE. In 332 BCE Alexander the Great was crowned pharaoh in Memphis temple of Ptah, which began an era of Greek cultural domination in the city (though there was a smaller community of Ionian Greeks even before Alexander). From this ancient document we learn that a woman named Artemisia had a child with a man who wronged her: when the daughter died, he did not pay for her burial. Artemisia then appealed to the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis. She wrote the curse asking Serapis and other gods to punish the man, and then brought the papyrus to the god's house - Serapeum. Artemisia pleaded that "while the appeal lies here, may the father of the young girl receive no favors at all from the god." [Serapis](#) (also spelled Sarapis and Oserapis) was originally a syncretism of two Egyptian gods: native to Memphis divine bull Apis and Osiris, God of the Underworld. The deity was redefined by the Greeks who forged a new deity that included features of Dionysus and Hades. Using the source as an example of exchanges in technology (papyrus) and religious beliefs, a teacher may consider asking students to think about the connections between the Greek and Egyptian cultures.



Translation (of the excerpt):

O Lord Oserapis and you gods who sit with Oserapis, Artemisia the daughter of Amasis [appeals?] to you against the father of her daughter, who has deprived her of her funeral rites and burial. So if he has not treated me and his children rightly, indeed has treated me and his children wrongly, may Oserapis and the gods grant to him that he does not receive burial from his children, and that he does not bury his own parents. [...]

Questions: What happened to Artemisia's daughter and why did she write the curse?

Which god did Artemisia address in the curse and where did she bring it?

Why did the Greek rulers of Egypt promote Serapis?

What did Artemisia ask the gods to do in the curse?

Source 2. [Dish with Apollo and Daphne](#)

Citation: Unknown artist, Gandhara, 1st century BCE, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38093>

About: In 327 BCE, Alexander the Great conquered Central and South Asian regions Bactria (area of modern Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), Gandhara (modern north-west Pakistan and north-east Afghanistan), and Swat (area of Pakistan), and married the Bactrian princess Roxana. Intensive trade and cultural contacts between the region and Greece continued after Alexander's death. Gandhara's abundant art reflect these contacts. Gandhara's [Buddhist sculptures](#) are especially notable due to their distinctive classical Greco-Roman style that includes draped robes, wavy hair, and anatomical realism. This dish depicts famous characters from Greek mythology – Apollo approaching the nymph Daphne (who then rejected the god's passionate advances and turned into the laurel tree). Apollo wears a conic Parthian hat that reflects contacts between Gandhara and Parthia (ancient region of Iran). The syncretic style of the dish's artistic motifs reveal the diversity of Gandhara's society and the kingdom's position on the cultural crossroads of antiquity.



Questions:

Why do you think it was important for Alexander to marry a woman from Asia?

What does the dish tell us about the art and culture in ancient Gandhara?

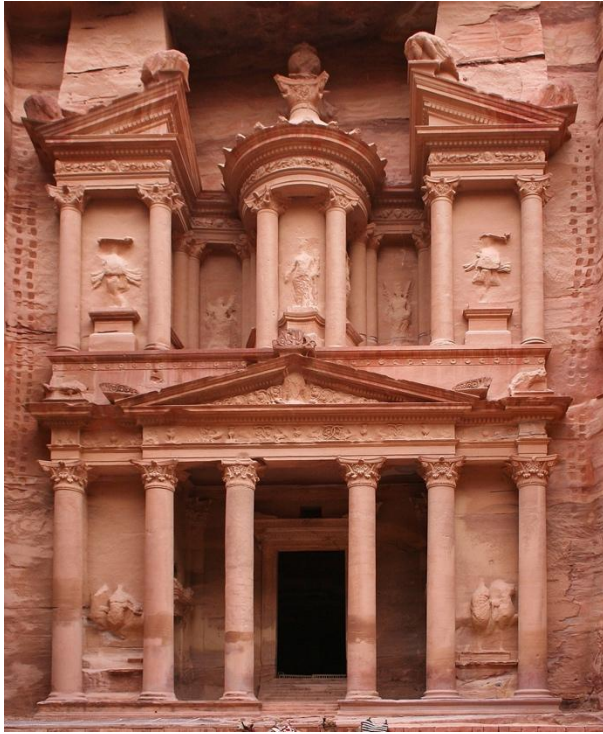
Who are Apollo and Daphne? Why do they appear on the dish from South Asia?

Source 3. Petra. Facade of a Rock Temple of Isis [Also Known as al-Khazneh, or the Treasury]

Citation: [Wikipedia](#). Map: American Museum of Natural History, [The Ancient City of Petra](#).

About: This temple is architectural evidence of the spread of Hellenistic culture across Afroeurasia and connections between Arabian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman cultures. Known as al-Khazneh (The Treasury), it is located in the ancient city of Petra, in modern Jordan. The Nabateans, a northern Arabian tribe, established Petra (Greek for “rock”) as a major trade center and the kingdom’s capital city. They controlled many trade routes of the ancient Middle East. Nabateans carved Petra’s magnificent buildings, temples, and tombs out of solid sandstone rock. In 312 BCE, the forces of the Macedonian king Antigonos I, one of the generals and successors (*diadochi*) of Alexander the Great, attacked their kingdom. Thus began regular contacts between the Nabateans and the Hellenistic world. The art and architecture of Petra reflects the deep influence of Greek culture established in the Near East after the conquests of Alexander the Great. Builders carved al-Khazneh, which was initially built as a tomb, out of a sandstone rock; its 25 meter tall façade presents the epitome of the Greco-Roman architectural style as it is one of the most elaborate structures of the city. The Hellenistic style of

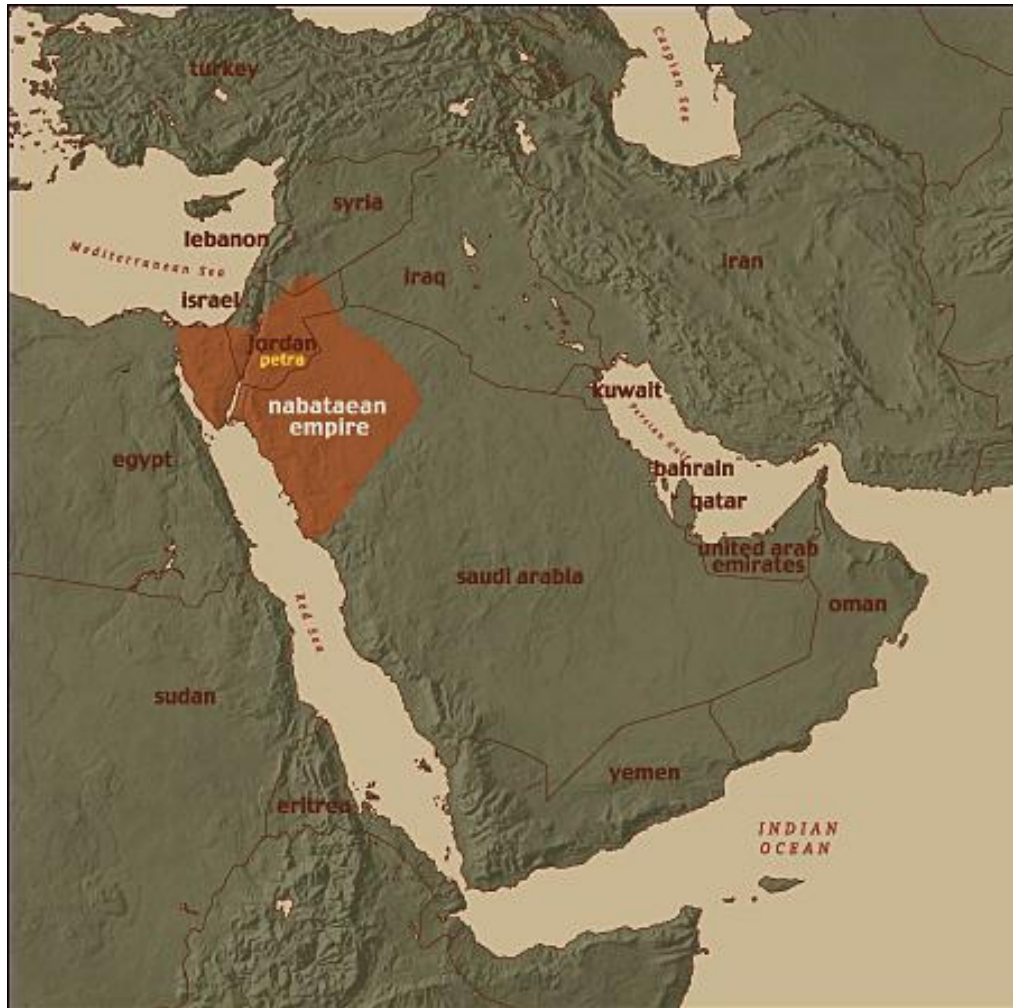
the tomb can be seen in its Corinthian columns with broken pediments (incomplete triangles) and anthropomorphic statues of gods. These motifs are very similar to the architectural style of Hellenistic Alexandria. Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade* featured Al-Khazneh in its final scenes.



Questions:

Look at the image: which elements of the architecture show Greek influence?

Find Petra on the map below. What made its location convenient as a trade center?

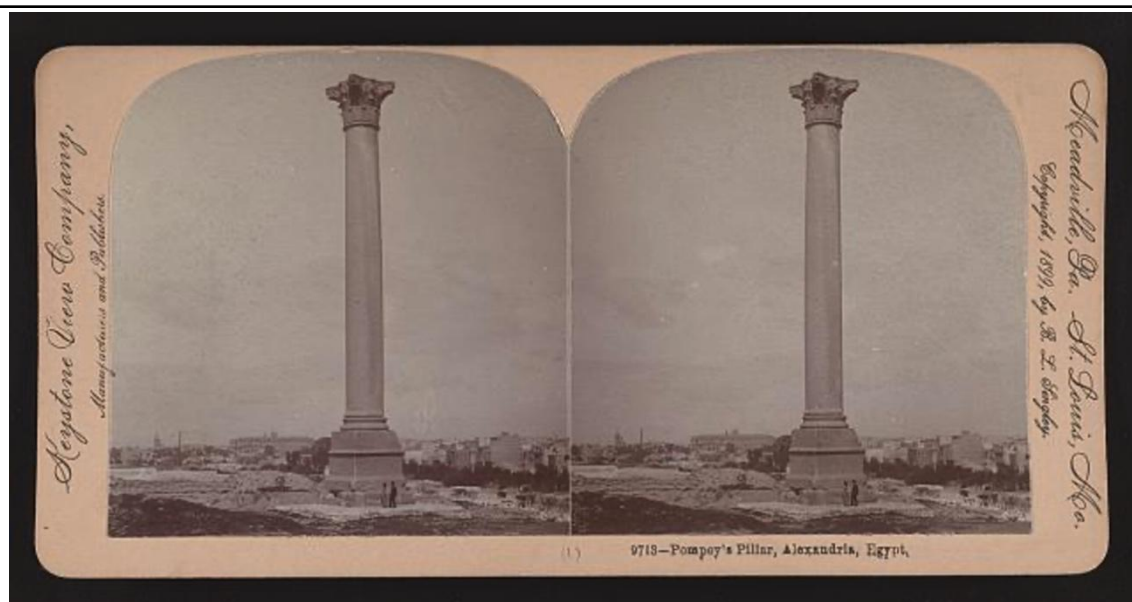


Map of the Nabatean Empire

Source 4. [Pompey's pillar](#)

Citation: [Library of Congress](#)

About: Pompey's Pillar - Roman triumphal column in Alexandria is another example of Hellenistic architectural style in the Middle East, featuring the Corinthian capital. Despite its name, the column has nothing to do with General Pompey, as it was dedicated to the Roman Emperor Diocletian in 297 CE. The pillar stands on the site of the Serapeum - temple of Serapis, the syncretic Greco - Egyptian patron god of Alexandria. The Alexandrian Serapeum was destroyed in 391 CE by Saint Theophilus, patriarch of Alexandria, and his followers, who also obliterated other pagan shrines and temples, then using the stones to build Christian churches.



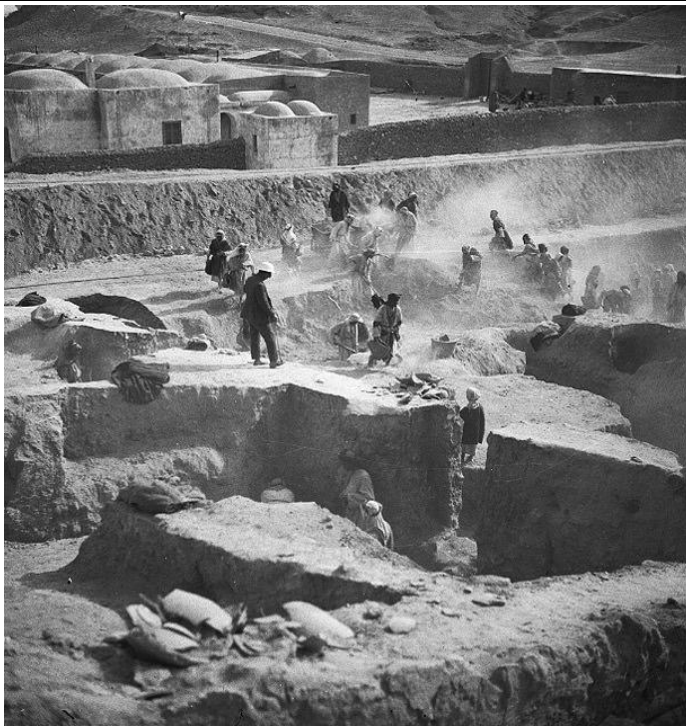
Questions:

- What do you think was the purpose of building triumphal columns?
- What is the architectural style of Pompey's Pillar?
- Who destroyed the Serapeum temple?
- Why did Saint Theophilus destroy the Serapeum temple and other pagan temples in the city?

Source 5. Dura-Europos: Excavating Antiquity

Citation: Yale University Art Gallery,
<https://artgallery.yale.edu/online-feature/dura-europos-excavating-antiquity>

About: The interactive website of the Yale University Art Gallery presents the archaeological site of the ancient town Dura-Europos (modern Syria). Dura Europos, located on the bank of the Euphrates river, was founded by the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire around 300 BCE as a caravan city. It was first conquered by the Parthian Persians in 113 BCE and then by the Romans in 165 CE, who utilized it as a military garrison on their eastern borders. The town was captured by the Sasanian (Neo-Persian) Empire after a siege in 256–57 CE and subsequently abandoned, which made it an archeological treasure - since nothing was built there after the third century CE, many of its ancient structures were preserved in stellar condition. Archaeological excavations of Dura-Europos have revealed temples to Greek, Roman, and Palmyrene (Syrian) gods, a Jewish synagogue, a Christian house-church, and a temple to Mithras – a Persian god, who was very popular among Roman soldiers. Teachers may explore the interactive website together with their students opening each available space and learning about various cultures that once inhabited the ancient town.



What do archeologists do?
How does archeology help us understand history?
What made Dura Europos an important historical place and an archeological treasure?
Which empires held Dura Europos throughout its history?

Source 6. Fragments of the Treatise on Plants by Dioscorides

Citation: Author Pedanius Dioscorides; translator Hisham ibn Musa ibn Yusuf, 1100-1200 CE. Original written ca. 55-60 CE. World Digital Library,

https://www.wdl.org/en/item/18415/#additional_subjects=Medicine%2C+Greek+and+Roman

About: This source illustrates the long lasting legacy and impact that Hellenistic culture and science had throughout centuries of world history. Greek physician and pharmacist Dioscorides (40 – 90 CE) lived in Cilicia, Asia Minor (modern Turkey), then a part of the Roman Empire. Dioscorides wrote a five-volume encyclopedia and medical manual *De materia medica* (Of medical substances) devoted to the use and effectiveness of various natural substances and recipes of the drugs. The treatise was highly regarded not only during his times but also in the Middle Ages in both the Western and Arab worlds. The source is a page from the manuscript containing the Arabic translation of Dioscorides's work copied in Upper Mesopotamia between 1100 and 1200. During the Middle Ages, Islamic scholars translated many Ancient Greek medical, philosophical, and scientific texts facilitating their [re-introduction in the Western world during the Renaissance](#).



Where did Dioscorides live?

What did Dioscorides write about in his five-volume encyclopedia and medical manual?

What is the source containing the Arabic translation of Dioscorides's work?

What was the role of Islamic scholars in reintroducing Ancient Greek medical, philosophical, and scientific texts in the Western world during the Renaissance?

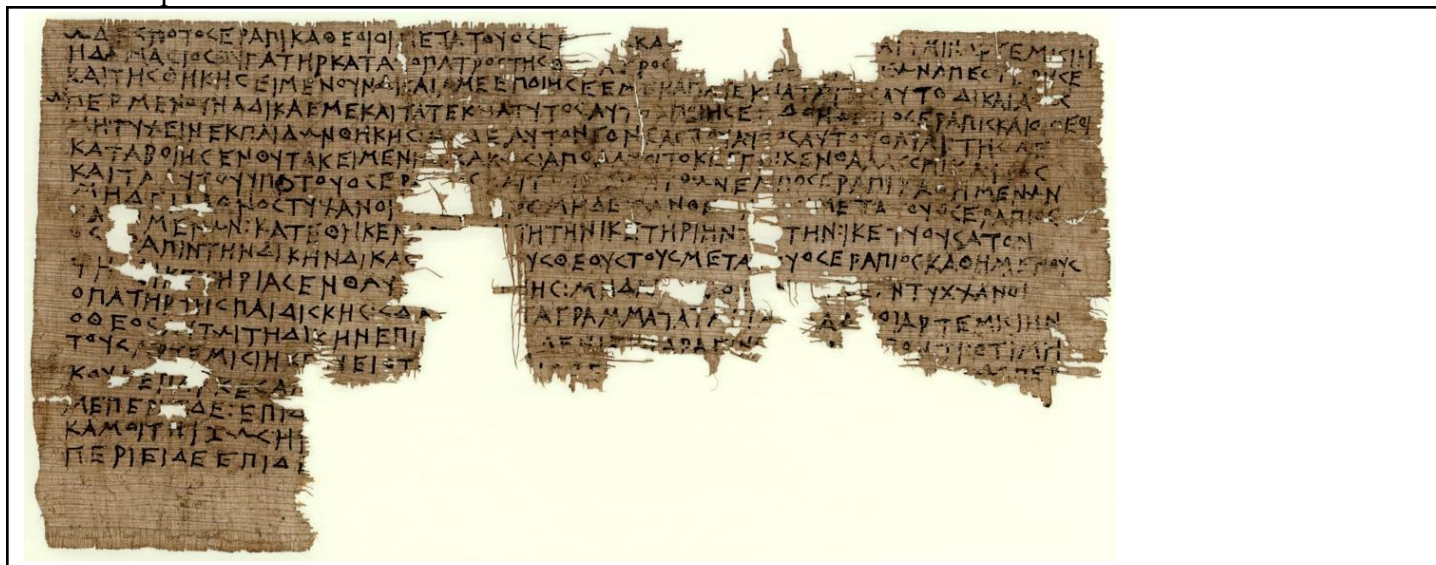
What does this source tell us about the influence of Hellenistic culture and science throughout centuries of world history?

Student Handout

Source 1. The Curse of Artemisia

About: This ancient papyrus comes from a community of Greek people who lived in the Egyptian city called Memphis in the late 4th century BCE. The Greeks started a big community in Egypt after Alexander the Great conquered it and was crowned pharaoh in Memphis temple of Ptah. The document was written by a woman named Artemisia. She had a daughter with a man who after the death of their daughter did not pay for her funeral. Artemisia wrote the curse addressing it to the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis and brought it to the god's temple called Serapeum. Greek rulers of Egypt promoted Serapis because he combined features of both Greek gods, like Dionysus and Hades, and Egyptian gods, such as Osiris and Apis.

In the curse Artemisia asked Serapis and other gods to punish the man: "while the appeal lies here, may the father of the young girl receive no favors at all from the god." Read the translation of a part of the curse and answer the questions.



Translation (of the excerpt):

O Lord Oserapis and you gods who sit with Oserapis, Artemisia the daughter of Amasis [appeals?] to you against the father of her daughter, who has deprived her of her funeral rites and burial. So if he has not treated me and his children rightly, indeed has treated me and his children wrongly, may Oserapis and the gods grant to him that he does not receive burial from his children, and that he does not bury his own parents. [...]

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Why did the Greek rulers of Egypt promote Serapis?

What did Artemisia ask the gods to do in the curse?



Bust of Serapis, end of the second century AD. The bust was patterned after the cult statue in the Serapeum made about 320-310 BC

Source 2. Dish with Apollo and Daphne

About: In 327 BCE, Alexander the Great conquered places in Asia like Bactria, which is now part of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, and also Gandhara which is in north-west Pakistan and north-east Afghanistan. He even got married to a princess from Bactria named Roxana! Even after Alexander died, there was a lot of trade and cultural exchanges between Greece and the Asian regions he conquered. The art from Gandhara shows how much these contacts influenced their culture. This dish shows Apollo trying to get close to a nymph named Daphne. She didn't like him and turned into a tree! This dish is a good example of how Gandhara had a very diverse art and society.



Questions:

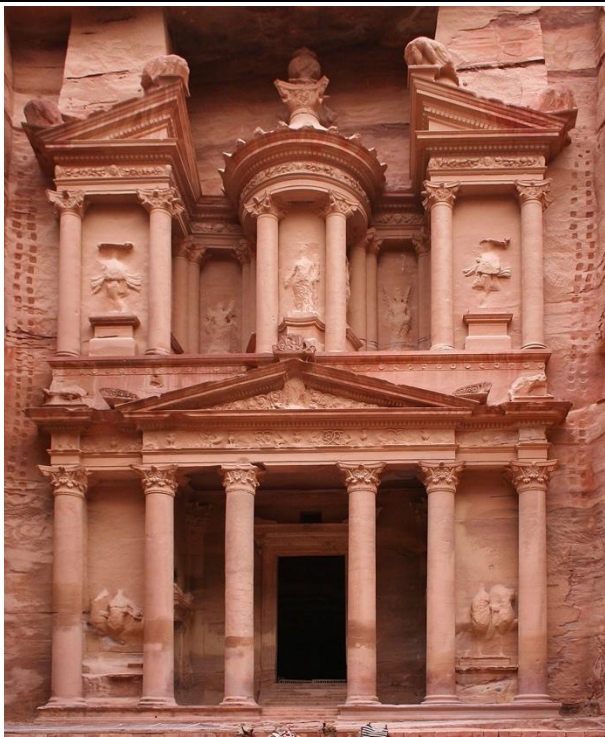
Why do you think it was important for Alexander to marry a woman from Asia?

What does the dish tell us about the art and culture in ancient Gandhara?

Who are Apollo and Daphne? Why do they appear on the dish from South Asia?

Source 3. Petra

About: This picture comes from an ancient city called Petra in modern Jordan. The people who lived there were called the Nabateans and they controlled many of the trade routes in the Middle East. Petra was a major trade center and the kingdom's capital city. The Nabateans carved their buildings, temples, and tombs out of really hard sandstone rocks. One of the most impressive buildings in Petra is called al-Khazneh, which means "The Treasury". It shows a mix of styles from different cultures. The Nabateans started to have more contact with the Greeks the conquests of Alexander the Great and his successors. The Greeks had a big influence on the Nabateans' art and architecture, and you can see that in al-Khazneh. This style is called "Hellenism" which means that Greek elements of art were combined with the local ones. The word Hellenism comes from the Greek word "Hellēnikós," which means "pertaining to Greece or Greeks." Hellēn means "a Greek."



Questions:

Look at the image: which elements of the architecture show Greek influence?

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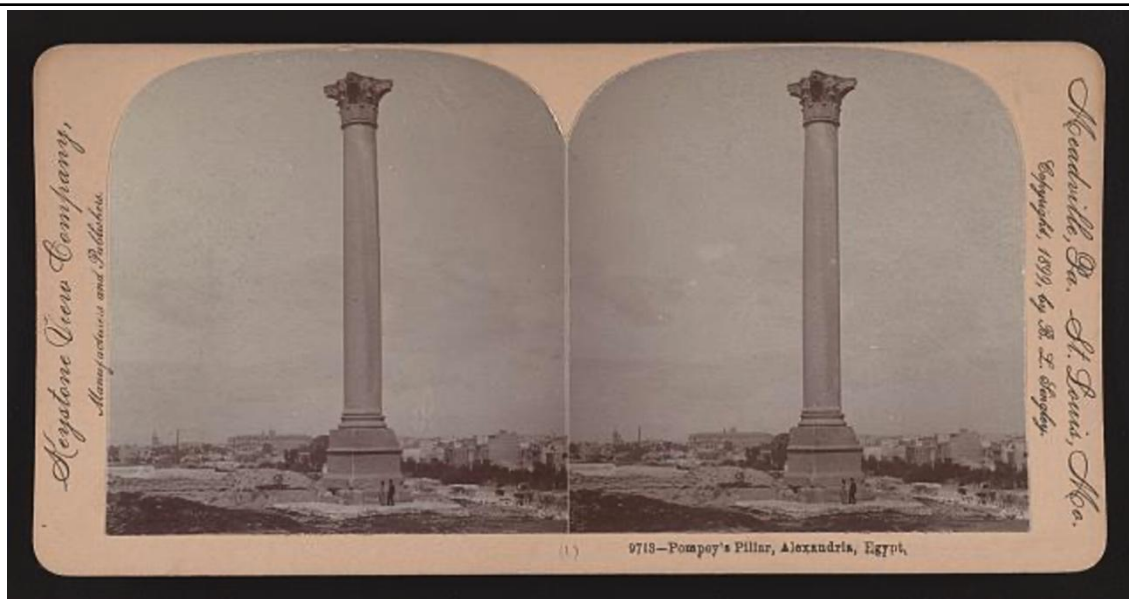


Map of the Nabatean Empire

Source 4. Pompey's Pillar

About: Pompey's Pillar is a tall column located in the city of Alexandria in Egypt. It was built in the Hellenistic style of architecture. Despite its name, the column was not built for the Roman general Pompey. Instead, it was dedicated to a Roman emperor Diocletian in 297 CE.

The pillar is located on the site where a temple dedicated to Serapis used to stand. Serapis was the patron god of Alexandria. The temple was called the Serapeum, and it was an important religious center in the city. However, in the year 391 CE, the temple was destroyed by Saint Theophilus, who was the patriarch of Alexandria at that time. He and his followers also destroyed many other pagan temples and shrines in the city, using the stones to build Christian churches instead.

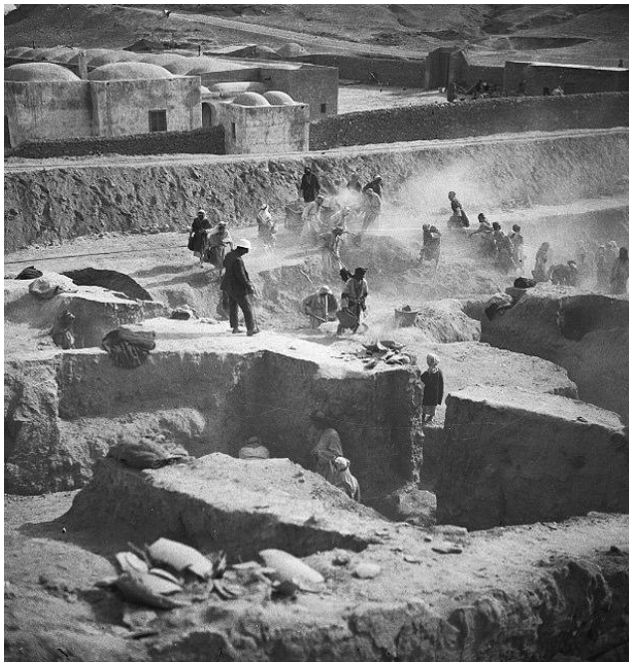


Questions:

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Source 5. Dura-Europos: Excavating Antiquity

About: The town of Dura-Europos was founded by the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire around 300 BCE as a caravan city, in what is now Syria. It was conquered by the Persians in 113 BCE and then in 165 CE by the Romans, who used it as a military base. Eventually, it was captured by the Sasanian (Neo-Persian) Empire and was abandoned (left empty) for centuries, which helped preserve its ancient structures. Archeologists have found evidence of many cultures in Dura-Europos, like temples for different gods from Greek, Roman, and Syrian cultures. There was also a Jewish synagogue and a Christian church. One of the temples was for Mithras, who was a popular god among the Roman soldiers.



What do archeologists do?
How does archeology help us understand history?
What made Dura Europos an important historical place and an archeological treasure?
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	Where did Dioscorides live? What did Dioscorides write about in his five-volume encyclopedia and medical manual? What is the source containing the Arabic translation of Dioscorides’s work? What was the role of Islamic scholars in reintroducing Ancient Greek medical, philosophical, and scientific texts in the Western world during the Renaissance? What does this source tell us about the influence of Hellenistic culture and science throughout centuries of world history?
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